

~ Japanese Poetry: Beauty in contrasts ~

A meditation by Roger W. Lowther

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made... The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." John 1:1-3, 14

We are often introduced as the missionaries who came "to play the piano in church." I smile inside each time as I think of our larger role here in Japan: to find, take delight in, and point to the God of all creation through Japanese art and culture. I can't fully comprehend the above Bible passage, but it must at least mean we will find hints of this mysterious figure "The Word" in almost everything around us.

Contrasts are often found at the heart of Japanese beauty. In America, a vase full of flowers is usually thought to be the most beautiful arrangement of flowers. But in Japan, through the tradition of ikebana, beauty is portrayed through only a few flowers, because that way you can create the stark contrasts of stillness and movement, darkness and light, life and death, and so many others. Contrasts are important in seventeen-syllable Japanese haiku poems. Over three hundred years ago, Takarai Kikaku wrote this haiku:

*The full harvest moon
On the tatami mats
A pine tree's shadow*

名月や
畳の上に
松の影

The heavenly contrasts with the earthly. The brightness of the moon emphasizes the crisp darkness of the pine tree's shadow. The shadow gently moves, compared with the stillness of the tatami mats (traditional Japanese woven floors). The harvest moon, signifying autumn, further hints at the contrast between the cooler air outside and the warmer air inside. The poem beautifully captures one moment in time and urges us to meditate on our relationship to the world around us.

The most famous haiku of all time was written by Kikaku's teacher, Matsuo Basho:

Imagine sitting by an old pond deep in thought. All is silent. Suddenly, a splash comes from the water and you notice the pond and the frog. The contrast of sound and silence, the young frog and the ancient pond, makes this poem so vivid. The sudden realization of the contrasts makes one feel alive. A sense of awe comes at this awakening to the life and beauty in the surroundings. The watermark in the background by Aisaku Suzuki illustrates this poem of a single splash bringing life into our burdened thoughts.

*By the ancient pond
A frog leaps
The sound of water*

古池や
かはづ飛びこむ
水のおと

The famous Japanese novelist, Yasunari Kawabata, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. His novel, *Snow Country*, overflows with descriptions like: "The quiet sound of the freezing snow over the land seemed to roar deep into the earth." The contrasts of "quiet" with "roaring" and the surface of the land with the deepness of the earth make the description beautiful. Japanese art beyond poetry and literature offers many similar examples.

The gospel brings us the ultimate of all contrasts. We are messed up and the cancer of our brokenness is even more serious than we think. God can make us more alive than we can possibly dream. Imagine the two extreme truths of wholeness and brokenness put together. This is the gospel. What could be more beautiful than weaving together the unraveled, light shining into darkness, life coming from death, victory coming from defeat, strength coming from weakness, and rescue beyond all hope?

The ark of the covenant foreshadows the contrast of the Word becoming flesh. Kevin J. Conner writes, "the ark was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold within and without. Wood speaks of His...humanity, and gold His Divinity. Two materials, yet one ark; two natures yet one person, the God-Man." This God-Man was immortal, yet became mortal; was a king, yet born in a stable; was all-powerful, yet became a helpless baby. There is indeed tremendous beauty in the contrasts, and this beauty urges us to worship Him.

